Why Men Fight
A Rebuttal

MIKE FISHER

The echoes of their voices still come to me across two decades and 10,000 miles, echoes that were etched indelibly in my memory during those respites from the grinding repetition of operation, patrol, and ambush that consumed our lives in Vietnam during 1966.

The night would take most of these men—the C.O. killed by a Chinese communist grenade at the "Horseshoe," Snake slashed by automatic weapon fire along Highway #9, Ox savaged by a Bouncing Betty near Hoi An, and on and on. Though the darkness of those years has blurred my vision of those men, their voices remain clear.

If INFANTRY contributor Harry F. Noyes, III, who wrote the article "Why Men Really Fight" (July-August 1989, pages 23-27), heard the same echoes, he would recast his analysis of the warrior's motivation. Those echoes reflect little of the idealistic patriotism that he considers the lynchpin of a soldier's motivation. Nor does a review of the literature lend any credence to his hypothesis.

Rather, the voices and memories that drift back to me from the killing fields of South Vietnam echo the earned humility and enduring hope that cloak combat infantrymen against the travail of their craft—humility that they have survived when others less fortunate have fallen, and hope that luck and skill will give them one more day, and then perhaps still another.

Often the survivors of those fields find their vision obscured by the immediacy and depth of their experience. Men involved in combat often recall only snapshots randomly selected from periods of stress and danger. The warrior himself proves unsure on both the circumstance and the motivation surrounding times of heavy combat. Consequently, often only the times of respite return with objective clarity.

For this reason, I feel confident in emphasizing the recollection that in my own rifle platoon little idealism or patriotism characterized the conversation of men who had been placed on the cutting edge of harm's way. Those intangibles found themselves sublimated by the stronger standards of pride, comradeship, and leadership—and even these more tangible standards remained largely unspoken. The common thread that binds together the voices of the Army infantrymen or Marine riflemen farthest forward during the Vietnam War focused on the hopes and dreams of ordinary men and boys involved in extraordinary circumstances.

"THE WORLD"

Those voices dwelled on the hope of going home to "the world," little realizing it was a world in which many of them would find themselves unfamiliar or unwelcome—unfamiliar because their youth had provided no depth of civilian experience, and unwelcome because many had come from underprivileged, disfranchised, or troubled backgrounds and had found sanctuary in the service of their country. Their conversations focused on that which they knew best: the common odyssey of training, combat experiences, and comrades gone.

The politics of the war seldom warranted discussion. Two factors contributed to this. First, these men found themselves ill prepared—by training, background, and interest—for the mental gymnastics needed to follow the complex ideological and political arguments that undergirded the grand strategy of that war.

Perhaps more important, the men of my platoon saw little reason to discuss a war over which they had no control. Caught in the interlocking web of human circumstance that led them to Sutter's Ridge and the Rockpile, they realized the futility of arguing their fate. Like the riflemen who had followed either Union General Ulysses S. Grant or Confederate General Robert E. Lee into the deadly inferno of the Wilderness little more than a century earlier, my men found themselves in a position where they had scant time for analysis.

What does motivate the warrior, then, if not the patriotic idealism that Mr. Noyes stresses?

First, for many, war offers an attraction few other endeavors in life can equal. Many men find in the adventure and danger of combat an elixir beside which the rest of life's experience pales. Because of the immediacy of his experience, the combatant often obscures this point. The uninitiated cannot believe that a soldier finds fulfillment in war, and the combatant himself often contributes to this belief. As a result, those who return from the killing fields tend to color their reminiscences to suit their audience, avoiding subjects the listener seems unable or unwilling to understand. Additionally, memory often short circuits an

accurate re-creation of events that have occurred under great stress. Finally, those same circumstances are beyond the returning warrior's ability to describe adequately. So silence follows.

"War is hell," as William T. Sherman emphasized. But the Union General whose indirect approach through the South hastened the downfall of the Confederacy also would have agreed with Robert E. Lee, who, looking past the Federal corpses strewn on the fields at Fredericksburg in 1862, said, "It is well that war is so terrible, or men would grow to love it too much,"

Second, as men often find peace in the stark simplicity of combat, they also gain a sense of comradeship and self-worth that had previously eluded them. Writer Stephen Crane calls it "a mysterious fraternity born out of smoke and danger of death." The hardship and danger of war, the common suffering for an often unnamed and unidentified cause bonds men into this fraternity. This bonding process contributes greatly to the warrior's motivation. That inner drive springs from both the belief in self and the responsibility to others that compel the combatant to live the creed of his unit. *Individual and collective pride form the* basis of unit and individual esprit de corps.

Napoleon realized the need to build this pride in the tough, irreverent legions that carried the French colors at the turn of the 19th Century. He called this quality in his *Grande Armee* the *Feu Sacre*, or "sacred fire." Through leadership and rewards, Napoleon sought to encourage and increase the elan that made his armies the pride, as well as the scourge, of the continent.

Many men of the *Grande Armee* entered the service filled with the traditional patriotic fervor and jingoistic slogans that surround the beginning of most wars. Others joined to escape the past or to search for new horizons. But as ideal turned to reality, the foot soldiers learned the lessons of pride, comradeship, and leadership. As the siren's song of war intensified, patriotism and jingoism disappeared.

As one bloodied World War I veteran grimly insisted, "There is no room for

idealism in the trenches," and that same admonition held true for the 173d Airborne Brigade at Hill 875 and for the Americal Division in the Arizona Territory and for the other nameless and forgotten places where individual soldiers met the lonely challenge of the battlefield in Vietnam with courage and grace.

The essential tools for the infantryman's motivational kit are comradeship, pride, and, of course, strong leadership. *The leader must blend and mix, creating* and maintaining the comradeship and pride that bond his unit into a cohesive whole. Committed to combat, the leader must spend frugally that most valuable capital of courage that fire team, squad, platoon, company, and division must conserve. To insure that only the necessary accounts receive payment from the infantryman's all too mortal treasury, the leader must expend that reserve with great care.

This kind of leadership supplies the glue that binds the unit in place. Mr. Noyes would do well to review his historical precedents. I believe it was leadership, not patriotism, that supplied the mortar of cohesion in the examples he cites.

• During the initial months of the German *Barbarossa* invasion in 1941, three million Russian soldiers, surprised and outfought, fled or surrendered. During the late fall and early winter of that year, however, Marshall Zhukov assumed overall command of the Soviet armies defending Moscow. He reorganized and counterattacked, striking the Germans with veterans fresh from combat in Asia, driving the Germans to the west, and turning the tide of World War II. It was properly reorganized and well led formations, not Stalin's belated cries for the army to defend Mother Russia, that turned Soviet despair to exultation.

• Mr. Noyes says that during the frenetic fighting on the Golan Heights in 1973, *Israeli troops distinguished* themselves because of patriotism. Perhaps. But the harshness of the Israeli basic training process had actually begun the unit bonding process. Additionally, Israeli Major General Chaim Herzog recalls the self-sacrifice of his leaders during the conflict. One relief unit for a beleaguered outpost found an Israeli brigade commander, battalion commander, and brigade artillery commander forward leading their men.

• By the fall of 1862, when Robert E. Lee led his slim legions of the Army of Northern Virginia across the Potomac toward Sharpsburg, Maryland, and a gentle bend in Antietam Creek for what proved to be the bloodiest single day in the Civil War, observers noticed a strange sight. Blood covered the approaches where the Confederate soldiers entered and exited the river. Shoeless and hungry, their ranks thinned by desertion and battle, only the strong remained. Lost was the ideology of a Confederacy divided politically by leadership and pur-

pose. In the ranks of the foot cavalry that followed Lee and his lieutenants, it was pride and comradeship that bound the soldiers to their leaders and drove them on to face the crucial days ahead.

Lee understood that men fight because of their nature, finding release in the danger and excitement of combat. That ability to fight must be strengthened by comradeship and pride and liberally seasoned with strong leadership, which supplies the catalyst for successful performance on the battlefield. Lee understood that patriotism and idealism grew from these factors, not the other way around, as Mr. Noyes maintains.

The question that follows from all this then is not why men fight but how we can improve upon their battlefield performance. The answers lie, as always, in the development of pride and comradeship in the individual and the unit, overarched by a strong dose of leadership.

Concerning his Army of Northern Virginia in 1864, Lee wrote to a subordinate, "Never has there been such men. Properly led, they will go anywhere. But proper commanders," he lamented, "where to obtain them?" Similarly, a U.S. regimental commander in the Korean War who had grasped the value of leadership told an observer, "The boys up there aren't fighting for democracy now," pointing to a firefight in progress, "they're fighting because the platoon leader is leading them."

Leadership is still essential to performance on any battlefield, and neither patriotism nor idealism will ever replace it.

Mike Fisher was a platoon sergeant in a rifle company in the 1st Marine Regiment in Vietnam. He has written numerous articles and book reviews for INFANTRY and other military publications. He holds a doctorate from the University of Kansas and was Director of Academic Advisement at Pratt Community College in Kansas when he wrote this article.

System Safety

PRECY D. AGUAS

A newly developed system (a piece of equipment or a facility) sometimes presents risks in a unit that the leaders have failed to consider. A system safety program, as required by Army Regulation 385-10, The Army Safety Program, will help a commander identify and eliminate safety risks, or at least to reduce them to an acceptable level.

System safety is the application of engineering and management principles, criteria, and techniques for making a system as safe as possible, given the constraints of operational effectiveness, time, and cost throughout all phases of the system's life cycle.

In this context, a system is a composite of elements that are used together in the intended operational or support environment to perform a given task or to achieve a specific production, support, or mission requirement. A typical ground vehicle system, for example, would include the vehicle, maintenance equipment, training equipment, personnel (both crew and support), facilities, and training and procedural manuals.

Army Regulation 385-16, System Safety Engineering and Management, dictates the requirements for developing and implementing a system safety program. It emphasizes that contractors, combat developers, materiel developers, and others who design and develop hazard control measures for various systems should influence the system early in its life cycle. But it also emphasizes the need for input from the leaders and soldiers who use the system in the field, and it appears that this need is not being fully achieved.

The Infantry Branch Safety Office at Fort Benning is in the process of developing a comprehensive system safety program that should improve system safety management for all infantry products. Two safety professionals are assigned to the Infantry School to perform system safety tasks in the development and fielding of systems for which the School has proponency.

A system safety engineer permanently attached to the Directorate of Combat Developments is responsible for providing design information for requirement documents in order to develop and field systems that will be safe for soldiers to operate and maintain. This engineer ensures that safety is considered throughout the development phase of a system's life cycle and also serves as the central point of contact on system safety at Fort Benning.

In addition, a safety specialist assigned to the Directorate of Evaluation and Standardization is responsible for seeing that safety is integrated into all programs of instructions, technical manuals, and other related publications for infantry proponent systems before their deployment. This specialist also manages a safety lessons learned data base that may provide information that can be incorporated into